

# The Midewin Bobolinking Project: Experiments in Field Ornithology

From Marta Witt, Public Affairs Officer, MNTP

A grant from the TogetherGreen Conservation Leadership Program will fund an innovative student research project at Midewin this summer. Volunteers will monitor and analyze data from artificial nests that are baited to collect data on nest predators. Participants will be involved in workshops beforehand, the field experiment and its analysis, and grassland bird habitat restoration projects.

Kimberley Meyer Ramirez, a volunteer bird monitor at Midewin and a graduate student in environmental biology at Governors State University, applied to the National Audubon Society for a TogetherGreen Conservation Fellowship. Her project was one of 40 selected for a 16-month fellowship with a \$10,000 grant funded by Toyota. Coordinated with Midewin, the Alliance, GSU, and the Illinois Natural History Survey, Kim's proposal was named The Midewin Bobolinking Project because the bobolink is an important grassland bird and its name allows us to emphasize the goal of "linking" students and the community to bird habitat conservation and Midewin. Plus it's catchier than its subtitle, Experiments in Field Ornithology!

Kim will begin by holding a series of workshops in the spring of 2009 for a variety of participants, still to be recruited from community groups and schools. Topics will include bird identification and behavior, habitat assessment, bird conservation, and field experiment techniques. Workshop attendees will discuss and compare life histories of each species and their ecology, including nesting, food habits, wintering requirements, migration, etc. A field experiment will then be conducted to address several questions:

- Are birds safer in degraded habitats or restored areas?
- Are predators in degraded habitats different from those in restored habitats?
- Are predators of shrub nests different from those that prey on ground nests?

About 120 artificial nests made of woven grass will be deployed at three different sites at Midewin. Half of the nests will be placed on the ground and half will be placed low in shrubs. Each nest will be baited with one Japanese quail egg and one molded clay egg to simulate two sizes of songbird eggs. The clay egg allows detection of small predators such as mice that may not be able to prey on the larger egg, as well as yielding clues through dental imprints as to which predators attacked the nest. In addition, digital motion-sensitive cameras will focus on some of the baited nests to help identify nest predators through photos. The artificial nests will be set out for 13 days, the approximate incubation time for most birds, and will be monitored every three days. Field experiment participants will be involved in monitoring the nests, analyzing the data, and presenting the results.

A third component of Kim's project is habitat restoration workdays at Midewin to remove invasive plants and plant native species. Through their restoration efforts, participants will learn about basic environmental issues such as the habitat needs of various bird species and the effect of invasive plants on bird habitat.

The results of The Midewin Bobolinking Project will be two-fold. Grassland birds will benefit as data collected by participants for the field experiment will augment existing information used to evaluate ecological management practices. Additionally, this project will increase community engagement in bird habitat conservation and build further support for restoration efforts at Midewin.

## Membership Application

If you are already a member, tell a friend!

Yes, I (or my organization) would like to become a member of the Midewin Tallgrass Prairie Alliance (MTPA).

Enclosed is my check for annual membership: ( ) \$15 for individuals, or ( ) \$25 for organizations

Optional donation: \_\_\_\_\_ Total enclosed: \_\_\_\_\_

(MTPA is incorporated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Your contribution is tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.)

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of organization and your title (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Street address: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_

State & zip code: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Send to: Midewin Tallgrass Prairie Alliance, P.O. Box 2026, Joliet, IL 60434